Double Tap

From Knock to Knock, knock

Zero Philosophy
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The preliminary scene can be envisaged as a séance. Within the room illumination is dimmed almost to darkness. A circle of people await a sign. They expect some kind of performance – perhaps a trick, or even a joke. Contact is sought. The preferred channel is 'table-tapping' – as it has been dismissively known. Nothing happens at first, or for some time. Then, an abstract, percussive announcement provokes the question.

"Who's there?"

"Is this a joke?"

Well, it isn't now, he thought, awakening from the delirium. The scene dissolves into mist. She'd broken it right at the start. It had been a good, defensive response – a blocking move. Perhaps she'd survive.

Still, outside the old movie, something was announcing itself. *Something who*? As if that could ever be a name. It's natural to hesitate. Answer "Who's there?" and you've already lost. After that, it has your attention. "You're not coming in," works better. It could be thought the optimal first response line. "Go away" would do, one might think. If only the attempted intrusion were less insistent. In any case, the important thing was not to show any interest. Choke back the question. They're counting on your mad hunger to know.

Isn't "Who's there?" already a blocking move? The alternative, it might be argued, would be to simply open the door. The question is a security check. "Identify yourself," it demands. Tacit in this request is a restriction, or qualification of access. There's a test. An accepted identity will function as a password.

The follow up question "X who?" reinforces the barrier. A two-step security protocol is demonstrated. (Double-check by Who-1 and Who-2.) Ominously, the procedure is designed to fail.

"In all seriousness, your security is a joke."

Even if *knock, knock* means only knocking twice, it already announces an insistence. It also does more. The second, as simple reiteration, abbreviates the incessant. Happening again opens the

door to potential recursion without limit.

Drilling into the words complicates their rhythm. The application of exotic research tools to this case is abundantly rewarded.

It was, she supposed, *meta-repetitive*. There were two low-pitch raps, each time. She caught the rapped onomatopoeic entity and virtually decomposed it. The outer pillars soon proved themselves redundant. Repeated silent letters produced hollow reverberations. It was a word that seemed to ripple outwards from a dull nuclear vowel. It manifested itself as an explosion of mad doublings. Some of these were obvious, some far less so. Hidden pulsations coursed through it.

Language doesn't get much more ritualized. The formula is strict. Each of the five lines is coded. The first two are constrained with absolute ceremonial rigidity. The third demands an input factor. The fourth is a mechanical response to the third. In the fifth – or 'punch' – line it all comes together. Anything subsequent is off-script.

The recipient of the joke has no liberty. He generates no surprise, or information. The instruction is culturally tacit. It works as an inverted Turing Test. *Pretend to be a robot.* (Reciprocally, the joker pretends to be human.)

Macbeth might be the source (Act 2 Scene 3). "Knock, knock! Who's there," asks the hung-over porter as a refrain.

"They want to fool you," she said nervously. "They're trying to get in."

They who? "How could you know that?" he asked. Her claim sounded paranoid. A little unexplained knocking, and suddenly aliens were invading? The interpretation was hyperbolic. "Why would anything want to get through?"

"Know who, and you know why."

Double tap is slang for an execution-style killing. It abbreviates the delivery of two low-caliber rounds into the back of the skull. There are echoes of *knock, knock* there. No doubt, at one level, that's just a coincidence. But it also *sounds right*.

The comic warhead is almost invariably a pun (or *paronomasia*). It relies typically on homophones. Most commonly of all, something-*hoo* triggers a semantic cross-over. The sign-switch is supposed to spark amusement, if only very rarely a laugh. The culmination is comparable to *hash collision*.

Does anyone find these things funny? Knock, knock jokes are stereotypically *bad*. The format precludes comedic sophistication. Their model evocation is a groan. Humor is being emulated, rather than produced.

Knock, knock

Who's there?

Noah.

Noah who?

Noah your enemy.

No one is going to sincerely suggest that's amusing. For one thing, it's simply not funny. It's not even sad. For another, it's too blunt. Who wants to be menaced as an amusement? We loop back, therefore, to a genre characteristic. Almost irrespective of any potential to amuse, a knock-knock joke can be *correct*.

They're never especially funny. Does anyone *ever* laugh at a knock-knock joke? It has to be rare. Groans are more typical. They weren't designed to 'crack you up' but rather to crack something open. Safe-cracking is roughly as amusing.

Still, humor – even merely formal humor – lets things in. By subtracting solemnity, it evades critical attention. That's what fools are for – to smuggle messages.

Her obsession with this nonsense had obscurely upset him. Now he'd reached the chapter of the horror story called *The Groan*. It was the worst part. Humor broke there. It involved no clowns, but almost might have. Undead jokes shambled through it.

"Knock, knock" means primarily *something is trying to get in*. Whatever it is, it requests an invitation. Knocking the door down would be altogether different. (A 'door knocker' is a stationary analog signaling device, not a battering-ram.) So we know, from the very beginning, that there's a door. The whole process takes place there. It sets the stage. More than this, it is the whole of the set.

The social ritual tacitly referenced is preliminary to an offer of permission. *Come in*. *Do come in*. These phrases are external to the joke, but they haunt it. They belong just beyond its periphery. The object is entry. *Let me in jokes* would not be a terrible translation.

Anthropologists talk about *rites of passage*. They don't mean anything like this, or, at least, they don't mean to. It can be confidently asserted, nevertheless, that no more definitive rite of passage

exists than the knock-knock joke. The final phase of childhood is its entire domain. No one really 'gets' them after this. Who else ever tells them?

At first, weeks before, he had attributed the knocking to childish tricks. The stupid joke infuriated him. It kept coming back, more insistently each time. *Knock, knock*, it tapped. He sought first to ignore it. Nothing happened then, for a while. He waited, on edge. Stressed silence lasted some few minutes. Spectral percussion haunted it. Then the sound, again, displacing its phantasmic substitute. Two raps, exactly. There wouldn't be more, not at any one time, he understood. That was the signature. The pause, now, was part of the performance. It was suspension made audible.

He crept through the hall silently, and flung open the door. No one was there. The knocking repeated. Though not yet quite maddening, it hinted strongly at what maddening would be. The intermittence was timed to the schedule of water torture. Its persistence had become a silent thunder, enduring beyond all tolerance. Soon he would have to shriek. Or, still worse, he would cry out "Who's there?"

There was another door, he now understood. Or rather, he understood the *fact*, if not at all the *idea*. The idea was set at an incomprehensible angle. It bent much too far. The other side of this door was removed by a fundamental asymmetry. The inside was accessible to the outside in a way inimicable to human cognitive order. His mind clutched at the notion of verticality – of ascent – while also stumbling into the abyss of its insufficiency. It did not in fact twist *up*, but only *out*.

The tale began to fill itself in, belatedly. He had missed the knocking, at first, because an extraordinarily indirect route muffled it. It had reached him from around a corner – figuratively speaking. It wasn't a turn that one could take, even in imagination – perhaps in imagination least of all. 'There' – definitively – lay the unimaginable. There would be simply no sense to it, if it didn't knock against the world.

The horror movie had it right. They traced the call. *It was coming from inside the house*.

A broken version of the joke unspooled in his head.

Knock, knock.

Who's there?

There, no, not at all, but in here, with you.

***

Liber Qwyz has been cleaned up.

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Still getting my head around this interface. Rather than spamming people at utterly unconscionable micro-intervals, I'll be trying to heap things up a little more. Clearer articulation would be nice, but I've no idea (yet) how to do that.

6 Comments

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neospare Dec 13, 2020

Confidence is only "too much" when you make a mistake, and realize your confidence was misplaced from its root, losing everything you've built in the process. Your empty shell, void of will, begging for the boot because you're not even worth being stepped on, is leather in an outside workshop. Stopping the immediate blood loss will get you further than you think. People can even survive in the vacuum of space for a moment.

So: if you knock back?

♡ 3 Reply Collapse

QKFPZQUT Nov 10, 2020

"Who's there?"

"No one, it's just us here. Come inside."

♡ 1 Reply Collapse

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